The Cleveland Museum of Art

Press Release

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Rosamond Wolff Purcell: Color Photographs
June 9–August 13, 1995

Some people create things, other people collect things. Rosamond Wolff Purcell's color photographs, featured in an exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art between June 9 and August 13, represent an intriguing twist on that dynamic—she creates art out of other people's collecting. Specifically, Purcell gains entry into the back rooms of natural history museums and university collections to make strikingly unusual photographs of natural specimens.

In 1986, Purcell and Harvard University paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould collaborated on *Illuminations: A Bestiary*, a book combining her photographs of stuffed birds, animal skeletons, preserved frogs and so on (from albatross to zozymus) with Gould's lively text about Purcell's photographs. The success of that project led to another collaboration in 1992, *Finders, Keepers: Eight Collectors,* which examined the contents of eight collections originally amassed in the name of science, starting with the *cabinet* (as such conglomerations of weird souvenirs from nature were popularly called) of the Russian czar Peter the Great and ending with two chapters on the 19th-century founder of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, Louis Agassiz. The 20 or so photographs in this exhibition were all taken over the past decade at the National Museum of Natural History in Leiden, The Netherlands. This spring (1995), Purcell was asked by Leiden curators to photograph that museum's entire impressive collection of recently extinct birds and mammals. Many of the resulting prints are included in this exhibition, along with earlier images from *Illuminations* and *Finders, Keepers.*

The show's subject matter encompasses whole taxidermied animals (Falkland Island wolves, the Grevi zebra, and a pig-footed bandicoot); patterned arrangements of mole and dog skins; still-life treatments of birds, snakes, fish skeletons and crabs; and number of decorated cigar boxes containing plaster casts Dutch paleontologist Eugene Dubois made of animal brains and collections of deformed eggs from the holdings of W. van Heurn, a Dutch naturalist who collected almost everything.

Purcell treats her sometimes-macabre subjects lovingly, with sumptuous use of natural light, creating works of art that delight the eye while perhaps unsettling the mind—an ambiguity that would probably have appealed to the tastes of the original collectors. Indeed, the original collectors are as much the subject of these photographs as the specimens themselves, notwithstanding the pure aesthetic power of the vibrant colors, visceral textures, intriguing natural forms, and witty and evocative juxtapositions of imagery. As Purcell herself put it in the Afterword to *Finders, Keepers,* "these artifacts are as full of human lunacy and gravity as any collector of oddities could wish for." This exhibition was organized by Tom Hinson, curator of contemporary art.

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